International Conference on Sustainable Tourism and Entrepreneurship

Vol. 01 No.01 August 2026, ISSN: 3163-2912

Designing Innovative Visual Story Mapping For Strategic Branding of Indonesian Tourism Villages: A Design Thinking Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The development of tourism villages in Indonesia holds significant potential for supporting sustainable tourism through the promotion of cultural richness and local wisdom. However, many tourism villages have not yet effectively optimized their digital branding strategies, particularly in delivering structured narratives that communicate cultural values, local legends, and authentic tourism experiences. This gap highlights the need for an approach that integrates narrative potential with digital media. This study aims to design visual digital story mapping as an innovative strategy for branding Indonesian tourism villages using a Design Thinking approach. A qualitative method was employed, with data collected through literature review, journal analysis, and documentation to identify key needs, challenges, and opportunities in developing digital promotional media. The Design Thinking framework consisting of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test was applied to generate user-centered solutions. The results indicate that visual digital story mapping effectively integrates natural resources, local culture, legends, and community activities into a structured, contextual, and engaging storytelling flow. The implementation in Desa Tomok in the Danau Toba area, the Dieng Plateau, and Wae Rebo in Flores demonstrates that each village has distinct narrative strengths—based on legend, spirituality, and journey-based experiences that can be systematically developed through story mapping. In addition to serving as a promotional medium, this approach functions as a storytelling guideline for content creators, enabling the production of consistent and identity-driven content. This study contributes to the development of more structured, engaging, and experience-based digital branding strategies for tourism villages in the era of digital transformation.

Keywords: *Story Mapping; Storytelling; Tourism Village Branding; Content Creator Strategy; Digital Tourism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's tourism sector has undergone significant transformation in response to the growing global awareness of sustainable tourism. The modern tourism paradigm is no longer solely focused on the exploitation of natural resources as the primary attraction, but also emphasizes cultural preservation, local community empowerment, and the creation of meaningful experiences for tourists. In this context, tourism villages have emerged as a strategic approach that integrates economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Tourism villages represent a form of destination development that prioritizes local potential, including natural resources, cultural traditions, and everyday community life as key attractions. This concept not only functions as a recreational space but also serves as a medium for education, cultural preservation, and the strengthening of local identity. Furthermore, tourism villages contribute to improving community welfare through participatory, tourism-based economic activities. Therefore, the development of tourism villages plays an essential role in promoting inclusive and sustainable tourism development strategies.

Indonesia holds substantial potential for tourism village development due to its rich cultural diversity, ethnic plurality, and unique geographical conditions. Each village possesses distinct identities and local narratives, such as legends, myths, traditional rituals, and unique socio-cultural practices. These elements are crucial in shaping experience-based tourism, where visitors do not merely observe but also engage with and understand the meaning behind the destination. This aligns with the concept that tourism experiences are constructed through emotional engagement and narrative. (Moscardo 2020).

Tourists in the digital era further emphasize the importance of experience-based approaches. Modern

travelers tend to seek authentic experiences and narratives that can be shared through digital media. Storytelling has become a crucial element in destination marketing, as it enhances attractiveness, shapes perception, and influences tourists' travel decisions. (LI, ZENG, AND TAY 2024). Tourism villages in Indonesia still face challenges in developing effective digital branding and promotional strategies. The promotional content produced is often predominantly visual, lacking structured narratives, which limits its ability to build a strong destination identity. Studies indicate that storytelling in tourism remains fragmented and has not yet been comprehensively integrated into destination marketing strategies. (Zhang and Ramayah 2024).

The advancement of digital technology has transformed the way tourists search for information and interact with tourism destinations. Social media has become a primary platform for destination exploration, making visual elements and narrative essential components of tourism communication. In this context, Visual Communication Design plays a crucial role in delivering information effectively through the integration of visuals and storytelling. Digital storytelling in tourism has been shown to enhance user engagement and strengthen cultural communication through digital media. (Kasemsarn and Nickpour 2025).

Story mapping is a method that integrates narrative, visual elements, and digital maps into a unified communication system. This approach enables the delivery of stories that are connected to specific geographic locations, thereby creating more contextual and immersive experiences. By linking narratives with spatial contexts, story mapping enhances users' understanding of the relationship between place, culture, and experience. (Zheng, Zou, and Wang 2026).

The development of tourism village branding based on visual digital story mapping requires an understanding of the narrative characteristics of each village, such as legends, culture, and tourism experiences. Storytelling in tourism plays a crucial role in enhancing destination attractiveness, as it enables the creation of more meaningful experiences for visitors.(Mehmetoglu and Engen 2011).

The emergence of influencers and content creators as key actors in digital promotion has significantly influenced tourism village branding strategies. However, the lack of structured narrative guidelines often results in content that is inconsistent and fails to fully represent the identity of the village. Therefore, there is a need for a medium that functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a storytelling guide for content creators. In the process of designing digital media, the Design Thinking approach becomes highly relevant due to its user-centered orientation. Design Thinking consists of the stages of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test, which enable the development of innovative solutions based on user needs. Studies have shown that this approach is effective in enhancing innovation and increasing the visibility of tourism destinations through the development of digital platforms. (Azim Azahari, Aiedil Syazwi Razali, and Md Ali 2025).

This study selects three tourism villages in Indonesia as case studies, namely Desa Tomok in the Danau Toba area, Dieng Plateau, and Wae Rebo in Flores. These villages were purposively selected due to their distinct and representative narrative strengths, including legend and historical narratives, spirituality and cultural myths, as well as journey-based experiences and traditional lifestyles. These differences provide an opportunity to analyze how story mapping can be flexibly applied according to the unique identity of each village. The analysis of these three tourism villages aims to identify storytelling patterns, narrative structures, and the potential integration within visual digital story mapping. This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to understand the phenomena of tourism village branding, storytelling, and digital media development. Data were collected through literature review, journal analysis, and documentation. Therefore, this study aims to design *visual digital story mapping* as an innovative strategy for branding Indonesian tourism villages using a Design Thinking approach. It is expected that this research will produce a model capable of integrating cultural narratives, visual communication, and user experience into an effective

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism villages represent a form of community-based tourism that integrates natural resources, cultural heritage, and the social life of local communities as primary attractions. This concept is not solely oriented toward tourist visits but also emphasizes cultural preservation and the improvement of local community welfare (UN Tourism 2018).

In the context of sustainable tourism development, tourism villages represent a relevant strategy as they are capable of creating a balance between economic, social, and environmental aspects. In their development, tourism villages require strong branding strategies to establish identity and differentiation amid increasing destination competition. Branding is not only related to visual identity, such as logos or slogans, but also encompasses perceptions, experiences, and values associated with a destination. In the tourism context, effective branding is able to shape a unique destination image and enhance its attractiveness to visitors. However, studies indicate that many tourism villages still face challenges in building consistent branding, particularly in the utilization of digital media. This

condition highlights the need for innovative approaches that can integrate local identity with effective digital communication strategies.

Digital transformation has brought significant changes to the tourism industry, particularly in the way destinations are promoted and information is distributed. Modern tourists are increasingly reliant on digital technologies, including social media, video platforms, and location-based applications, in planning their travel experiences (Tussyadiah 2020). Digitalization enables the delivery of information in a faster, broader, and more interactive manner. However, the key challenge lies in managing digital content so that it is not only informative but also engaging and capable of fostering audience interaction. In the context of tourism villages, digital transformation still faces various obstacles, such as limited digital literacy, a lack of content strategy, and minimal innovation in promotional media.

Visual storytelling is an approach within Visual Communication Design that integrates visual elements and narrative to convey messages effectively. This approach emphasizes the ability of visuals to evoke emotion, construct meaning, and enhance audience engagement. In the context of tourism, storytelling plays a crucial role in creating deeper and more meaningful travel experiences. Narratives related to culture, history, and local life are able to establish emotional connections between tourists and destinations. (Fog et al., 2005).

Recent studies indicate that digital storytelling can enhance destination visibility and strengthen local cultural identity. The implementation of storytelling in tourism village promotion is often not systematically structured. Much of the promotional content tends to focus on aesthetic visuals without being supported by strong and coherent narratives. As a result, the conveyed message becomes less effective in establishing a distinct destination identity (Nanita, 2025).

Digital story mapping is an extension of storytelling that integrates narrative with digital maps. This approach enables the presentation of information in a contextual manner by linking stories to specific geographic locations. According to Caquard and Cartwright story mapping functions not only as a navigation tool but also as a medium for conveying spatial narratives. By combining text, visuals, and geographic data, story mapping can create more interactive and immersive user experiences (Dickmann 2015).

In the context of tourism, digital story mapping has the potential to integrate various destination elements, such as natural resources, cultural activities, historical narratives and local legends, as well as tourism experiences. However, research on the application of story mapping in tourism villages remains limited, particularly in the context of digital-based branding development. This indicates an opportunity to develop story mapping models as innovative promotional media. Furthermore, the growth of social media has led to the emergence of influencers and content creators as key actors in tourism promotion. Influencers have the ability to shape audience perceptions through the visual and narrative content they produce (Crystal Abidin 2018).

Content produced by influencers tends to be more personal, authentic, and easily accepted by audiences, thereby having a significant influence on travel decision-making. However, one of the main challenges is the lack of systematic narrative guidelines for content creators in presenting destination stories. As a result, the content produced is often inconsistent and fails to fully represent the identity of tourism villages. Therefore, there is a need for a medium that can function as a storytelling guide, enabling content creators to produce more structured content aligned with destination branding.

Design Thinking is an innovative approach that focuses on user needs (*user-centered design*). This approach emphasizes a systematic creative process through five stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Gonen, 2019). In the context of digital media design, Design Thinking enables the development of solutions that are not only creative but also relevant to user needs. This approach supports: (1) understanding the needs of tourists and content creators, (2) defining problems accurately, (3) generating innovative ideas, (4) developing media prototypes, and (5) testing the effectiveness of solutions (Tim Brown 2009).

Recent studies indicate that Design Thinking is effective in developing culture- and tourism-based media, as it integrates technological, human, and social aspects. This approach is applied as a design framework due to its user-centered orientation and its ability to produce innovative solutions through an iterative process. According to Tim Brown in *Change by Design* (2009), Design Thinking is a human-centered approach to problem-solving that consists of five interconnected stages.

1. The *empathize* stage involves gaining a deep understanding of users through observation and experience, allowing designers to view problems from the users' perspective.
2. The *define* stage focuses on clearly formulating the core problem based on insights gathered during the empathize phase.
3. The *ideate* stage involves generating a wide range of creative solutions without constraints.
4. The *prototype* stage translates ideas into tangible forms or initial models for further development.
5. The *test* stage evaluates the proposed solutions to determine their effectiveness and to enable continuous improvement.

These stages are not linear but iterative and interconnected, allowing for the development of innovative solutions that effectively address user needs.

3. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. It aims to gain an in-depth understanding of

phenomena related to tourism village branding, storytelling practices, and the development of digital media within the context of visual communication. The descriptive approach is used to illustrate the conditions, needs, and potential of tourism villages in developing promotional media based on digital story mapping (Creswell 2014).

This study focuses on a design-based research approach, aiming to develop a concept and media model in the form of visual digital story mapping as a branding strategy for tourism villages using a Design Thinking approach. The data used in this study are qualitative, consisting of secondary data and supporting data. Secondary data include academic books related to Visual Communication Design, storytelling, and Design Thinking, as well as national and international journal articles. Supporting data consist of digital content from social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) and tourism village case studies.

This research adopts the Design Thinking approach as the design method due to its user-centered orientation and its ability to generate innovative solutions. The process includes the empathize stage to understand the needs of digital tourists and content creators, the define stage to identify problems related to the lack of structured storytelling, the ideate stage to develop the concept of visual digital story mapping, the prototype stage to create narrative flows and media models, and the test stage to evaluate narrative clarity and its potential usability.

The research objects were selected using a purposive sampling method, focusing on tourism villages in Indonesia that demonstrate strong narrative potential. The selection criteria include: (1) the presence of rich cultural narratives such as legends, myths, or local history; (2) distinctive cultural practices and community activities; (3) strong visual and experiential tourism potential; and (4) relevance for development within digital storytelling media. Based on these criteria, three tourism villages were selected as case studies, namely Desa Tomok in the Danau Toba area, Dieng Plateau, and Wae Rebo in Flores. These villages represent different narrative characteristics, including legend-based storytelling, spirituality and cultural myths, and journey-based experiences and traditional lifestyles.

The outputs of this study include a visual digital story mapping concept, narrative structure, media model, and digital branding strategy for tourism villages. Through these case studies, the research aims to demonstrate how narrative-based approaches can be systematically developed into digital branding strategies using Design Thinking.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The design of visual digital story mapping as a branding strategy for tourism villages is able to address the primary issue of the suboptimal delivery of structured narratives related to cultural values, local legends, and tourism experiences in digital media. Through the Design Thinking approach, the design process does not solely focus on visual aspects but also emphasizes the integration of user needs, local narrative richness, and digital experience. Conceptually, the resulting visual digital story mapping model integrates four main elements of tourism villages: natural resources as the geographical context, local culture as identity, legends or myths as the narrative foundation, and community activities as representations of authentic experiences. These elements are organized into a structured narrative flow consisting of introduction, exploration, experience, and reflection.

This structure demonstrates that digital story mapping can transform previously fragmented promotional patterns into a more systematic and experience-oriented approach.The findings also indicate that visual digital story mapping serves an additional function as a storytelling guide for influencers and content creators. The presence of a clear narrative structure enables content production to become more directed, consistent, and aligned with the identity of the tourism village. In this context, digital story mapping functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a creative guideline within the digital tourism communication ecosystem. The development of story mapping based on the Design Thinking approach in tourism villages highlights its potential as an innovative strategy for strengthening digital branding.

1. Desa Tomok, Danau Toba Area (North Sumatra)

Desa Tomok, located in the Danau Toba area, possesses strong narrative potential rooted in legends and Batak cultural history. The village was once the center of a Batak Toba kingdom led by King Sidabutar, with various historical remains such as megalithic stone tombs and traditional houses that are still well preserved today.



Figure 1. Rumah Bolon
Source: DesawisataTomok, 2025

Local legends even suggest that King Sidabutar was one of the earliest figures in the history of the Batak community in the area. In addition, cultural performances such as *Sigale-gale* and the use of *ulos* textiles further reinforce the village's visual and symbolic identity. Desa Tomok has strong potential to be developed through story mapping, as it possesses a rich and layered storytelling

structure, ranging from origin myths and royal history to living cultural practices. Each location within the village can be connected to narratives that collectively build an immersive tourism experience. (Desa Wisata Tomok 2025).

The development of visual digital story mapping in Desa Tomok, located in the Danau Toba area, demonstrates how the richness of Batak legends and culture can be integrated into a cohesive narrative flow through a Design Thinking approach.

a. Empathize: This stage involves understanding the needs of tourists and content creators, who generally perceive Danau Toba primarily as a natural destination without recognizing its deeper cultural narratives, such as the origin legend of Lake Toba, the history of King Sidabutar, and Batak cultural symbolism, including *ulos* textiles and traditional dances. In addition, it was found that content creators often face difficulties in structuring coherent storylines when producing content in this location.
b. Define**:** This stage identifies the main problem as the lack of integration between visual elements (such as the lake and traditional village) and cultural and historical narratives. Existing promotional content tends to highlight scenic views without constructing a continuous and meaningful story.
c. Ideate: At this stage, a story mapping concept based on legend is developed as the core narrative foundation. The storyline begins with the origin of Lake Toba, followed by the exploration of cultural sites such as the tomb of King Sidabutar, and continues with tourism experiences such as *tortor* dance performances and interactions with local communities.
d. Prototype**:** The concept is realized in the form of an interactive digital map that connects each location point with narrative segments, visual elements, and cultural information. The narrative structure is organized into a sequence: introduction to the legend → cultural exploration → tourism experience → reflection on Batak cultural values.
e. Test**:** The results indicate an improvement in users' understanding of the cultural context and assist content creators in producing more narrative-driven content rather than purely visual material. Therefore, story mapping in Desa Tomok strengthens its branding as a cultural destination rooted in legend.

2. Dieng Tourism Village, Central Java

The Dieng Plateau possesses a strong storytelling character rooted in spirituality and local beliefs. One of the most prominent cultural phenomena is the tradition of dreadlocked hair among children, which is believed to be a gift from ancestral figures such as Kyai Kolodete and must undergo a special ritual known as *ruwatan*. This tradition has been passed down through generations and has become an essential part of the cultural identity of the Dieng community. The development of story mapping in the Dieng Plateau emphasizes the integration of natural landscapes, historical context, and unique local beliefs, particularly the phenomenon of dreadlocked children.



Figure 2. Dreadlocked Hair-Cutting Ritual
Source: Detikjateng, 2023

Furthermore, the *ruwatan* ritual is not merely symbolic but also reflects the relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual beliefs that remain deeply embedded in the local community. Dieng is highly suitable for story mapping analysis due to the integrated relationship between natural landscapes, historical sites, and spiritual narratives within a contextual and immersive storytelling flow. Therefore, the development of story mapping in the Dieng Plateau highlights the integration of landscape, history, and distinctive local beliefs, particularly the phenomenon of dreadlocked children, into a cohesive narrative structure. (Detik Jateng 2023).

a. Empathize**:** It was found that tourists are primarily attracted to the natural beauty of Dieng, such as its craters and mountainous landscapes, but have limited understanding of the cultural and spiritual values behind these local phenomena. Content creators also tend to highlight "viral" visual aspects without incorporating narratives that explain cultural meanings.
b. Define**:** The main problem identified lies in the lack of contextual narratives that connect natural phenomena with local beliefs and rituals. Existing storytelling has not effectively explained the relationship between space, culture, and experience.
c. Ideate: A story mapping concept based on a "spiritual landscape narrative" was developed, where the narrative focuses not only on physical locations but also on symbolic meanings. The story begins with the introduction of Dieng as the "land above the clouds," followed by an exploration of temple history, cultural experiences through the dreadlocked children ruwatan ritual, and concludes with reflections on the relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality.
d. Prototype: The concept was visualized in the form of a digital map with layered storytelling that connects key points such as the Arjuna Temple complex, Sikidang Crater, and cultural ritual sites. Each point is accompanied by a narrative explaining its cultural and historical context.
e. Test: The results indicate that users more easily understand the connection between visual elements and cultural context. Content creators are also better supported in developing more educational and meaningful content, positioning Dieng not only as a

natural tourism destination but also as a cultural and spiritual landscape.

3. Wae Rebo Village, Flores (East Nusa Tenggara)

Wae Rebo Village in Flores demonstrates strong storytelling rooted in travel experience and traditional ways of life. The village is located at an altitude of approximately 1,100 meters and is well known for its Mbaru Niang traditional houses, which are shaped and arranged in a circular formation surrounding a central ritual space (*compang*). This spatial structure reflects the philosophy of balance between humans, nature, and ancestors in the life of the Manggarai community.



Figure 3. Wae Rebo Village
Source: Pariwisata Indonesia, 2019

The uniqueness of Wae Rebo lies not only in its architectural form but also in the cultural values that are still preserved, such as traditional ceremonies, communal cooperation systems (*gotong royong*), and the use of natural materials in house construction. The village has even received international recognition through a UNESCO award for its success in preserving cultural heritage. Wae Rebo is particularly strong in its journey-based narrative approach**,** where the journey to reach the village becomes an essential part of the tourism experience (Pariwisata Indonesia 2019).

The development of story mapping in Wae Rebo, Flores, emphasizes a journey-based storytelling approach as its primary strength.

a. Empathize**:** It was found that tourists are attracted to the uniqueness of the traditional village and the Mbaru Niang houses, but do not yet understand that the journey to the village is an essential part of the experience. In addition, content creators often focus only on the final destination (the village) without constructing a narrative of the journey itself.
b. Define: The lack of journey-based storytelling results in an incomplete representation of the tourism experience. The narrative tends to be fragmented and does not reflect the process of travel, which is the core of the experience.
c. Ideate**:** A story mapping concept based on a "journey experience" approach was developed, where the journey to the village becomes the main storyline. The narrative begins at the trekking starting point, continues through the exploration of forest paths and interactions with nature, and culminates in arrival at the village and engagement with the local community.
d. Prototype: The concept was realized in a digital map that presents the travel route as the main narrative flow. Each point along the journey is enriched with narrative elements, visuals, and experiential descriptions that can be perceived by tourists.
e. Test: The results show that this approach enhances users' emotional engagement, as they are able to virtually experience the journey before visiting the location. Content creators can also use this structure as a guideline for producing more storytelling-driven content.

Each village demonstrates a different narrative approach whether based on legend, spirituality, or journey—yet all can be integrated into a structured story mapping framework. This highlights that the success of tourism village branding depends not only on its inherent potential but also on how that potential is packaged through systematic narratives, strong visuals, and meaningful experiences. Therefore, digital visual story mapping based on Design Thinking emerges as an effective strategy to address the challenges of promoting tourism villages in the digital era.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that visual digital story mapping using a Design Thinking approach is effective in strengthening the branding of tourism villages by highlighting each village's unique narratives. Through the stages of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test, a more structured and easily understandable storytelling flow is produced. The application of this approach in Tomok Village in the Lake Toba area, Dieng Plateau, and Wae Rebo Village in Flores shows that each village possesses distinct narrative strengths, which can be systematically packaged through story mapping. Therefore, this approach can be widely implemented as a strategy for tourism

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